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Editor
K. RAMAKOTISWARA RAU



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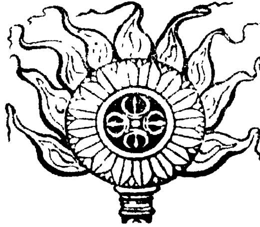
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CONTENTS

ETHICS AND POLITICS: THE MODERN CONCEPT

By N. Raghunathan

At no time in recorded history was society more preoccupied with ethical questions than it is to-day. But it is equally safe to say that at no time was it less mindful of ethics in practice. Its preoccupation with ethics is of the same order as was the preoccupation of Milton's Satan with the Omnipotence that had deposed him; only the roles happen to be reversed in this case. We have in the atom bomb the apotheosis of brute force. But those who let it fall on Hiroshima—the policy-makers of Britain and America—were firmly convinced, so they declared, that it was necessary in order to end the war and thus prevent the prolongation of human suffering. But this official attitude was a sort of protective integument which covered a variety of conflicting mental reactions and emotions. Thus, those who prided themselves on their realism argued that if the Allies had not been the first to drop the bomb the Germans might have done the same, and in that case righteousness would have gone under. The mothers of America put it more crudely when they declared that if the bomb had not been used perhaps half a million more of their sons would have had to be sacrificed. They would never countenance that, when the war could be stopped by a few hundred thousand Japs being blown up; in any case there were too many of them. But in America as elsewhere there are men with a tender conscience, and it was stated the other day that a body of these were banding themselves to collect subscriptions for rebuilding Hiroshima and Nagasaki as far as possible, particularly the churches and schools, in order to bring the surviving Japs the consolations of religion and incidentally expiate their own guilt for the extermination in a split second of two fair and flourishing communities.

That is typical of the way the debate goes on on the entire moral front. On the one hand there are the fifty odd nations who compose the United Nations feverishly ranging themselves on one side or other for the third war, the inevitability of which everybody seems to take for granted. The war-time conscription of the most powerful intellects in the world of science in the cause of perfecting more and more formidable engines of destruction has now been placed on a permanent footing by the common if tacit consent of all nations which have the ambition and the resources to enter this competition. On the other side of the medal, you find the scientists themselves alternately wringing their hands in despair at the perversity of the Governments and the stupidity of the public, and sturdily declaring that they would oppose secrecy in regard to the bomb and other like missiles and at the same time educate the public to a realisation of the fact that civilisation stands on the brink of the abyss. Meanwhile the educationists, the

phically new and that humanity, if it wishes to survive, must come to some understanding about it. But like rabbits running round and round in a hutch they are for the most part unable to escape from the accustomed grooves of thought. We seem landed in an impasse all right.

But the cloud is not without a silver lining. The concept of One World is seeping slowly into the consciousness of humanity, still largely unorganised and distracted as it is. After all, the idea as an active aspiration has been before mankind for more than a generation now. Two shattering wars in this period may seem to have made mincemeat of the basic assumptions underlying this concept. The marvel is, however, not that Woodrow Wilson's League foundered, but that the United Nations Organisation came to be substituted in its stead. Just as the Sanctions clause proved the Achilles heel of the League Covenant, the Big Power veto may prove the undoing of the U.N.O. But even if that happens, it seems to me that like Robert Bruce we shall go on trying again and again till we establish something that will wear well and serve its purpose. This is not, let me say, wholly a question of faith. The will to survive is our most prominent characteristic as a species; and it may be expected to be most active when the danger is greatest. After all, the rule of law within settled communities, which we now take for granted, must have seemed in the infancy of mankind equally chimerical as an ideal.

It is in this context that the practice of active non-violence associated with the name of Mahatma Gandhi naturally comes to mind when one casts about for what may be described as the modern concept of the proper place of ethics in politics. Non-violence is, of course, nothing new. It is at least as old as the Buddha, if not older. But non-violent resistance as a political technique or a substitute for war, though it has been tried on a small scale and with a certain degree of success in one or two instances, as for instance by the Finns against the Russians in the first decade of the century, has in Gandhiji's hands become, for the first time, the instrument of emancipation of a great nation. And its success was in some measure due to the fact that it insisted on personal discipline and self-denial on the part of privates as well as captains in the non-violent army. That it triumphed sooner than had at one time appeared possible was no doubt due to other causes. Some may explain this on the assumption that the heart had gone out of the old Imperialism. Others may prefer to think, not that the leopard had changed its spots, but that the world set-up had so radically altered that the old type of exploitation was no longer possible. Yet others might point to the fact that other countries, for example Burma, had also got independence, though they do not swear by non-violence. But all that does not invalidate the finding that the idea of creative non-violence propagated by the Mahatma has, like the great movements associated in the past with religious geniuses, liberated a power for

›d which is ethical in character and which may yet leaven the rld's thinking to some purpose.

If, nevertheless, ethics must still be regarded as being on the ensive in the contemporary world that can only be set down to the t that it is none too sure of itself. If politics may be regarded as art by which man organises himself in communities to pursue the ›d life, it can fulfil its function only if it continually keeps a blue-nt before it of a commonly accepted conception of the good life, in er words, of a common ethic. In primitive societies, customary rality supplied this need. Each community had its own system of igations and taboos; and men's faith in them was rarely disturbed, ause they rarely happened upon a view of life basically different n their own. The gradual emancipation of the individual from the trix of the society in which, like Michael Angelo's Adam, he is half-›edded, and the changes introduced by technological advancement ıbined to disturb his old tribal convictions. But, as the hunger for ıtude, for some guide to conduct is deeply implanted in the race, the ural evolution of society has been in the main the result of man's ıful attempts to establish equilibrium between his animal nature his moral aspiration.

But it would be fanciful to see here as in other manifestations of life-process an ascending spiral of progress. It may be more fitly ned, in some of the stages at least, to the kind of bargain that ›es let himself in for at the fair. Thus, in the morning time of the ›, when politics had not thrown up even the City state, we had not › a fairly highly developed system of ethics but a metaphysic to port it—crude or even fanciful as this last was in many of its mani-ations. But in post-Renaissance Europe the emergence of the ılar State was made possible by political philosophy ostentatiously ing company with ethics. Religion, especially in its institutional ıs, survived; but it became the fashion to speak of it more and more he private concern of the individual. Thus the capitalist class that well out of the Industrial Revolution regarded itself as profoundly ţious; but that did not prevent it from grinding the face of the poor. later Victorians lost their religion, thanks largely to Darwin; but were profoundly concerned with ethical questions and in course ime came to persuade themselves that what mattered was not ı in things that could not be proved but a blameless life devoted to ıan uplift. But, for their successors the props were removed from ›r them by the anthropologists and psychologists who combined to › that all morals were relative. The wheel had come full circle. ›e people came to hold with Hegel that the rational is the real, that tever is is right.

A way out of the impasse can only be found by courageously ›erting the existence of positive, fundamental values and positing ıeed for a metaphysic. It is an anthropologist, Dr. R. R. Marett, is quoted by Aldous Huxley as saying, "Real progress is progress